The black-tailed prairie dog, *Cynomys ludovicianus*, is a member of the squirrel family. Of the five species of prairie dogs in western North America, only the black-tailed prairie dog lives in the Great Plains. It has a black-tipped tail, brown fur, large black eyes and short legs and sharp claws developed for digging burrows.

**Black-Tailed Prairie Dog and Human - ScaleFast Facts**

**Height:** 12 inches (when standing upright).  
**Length:** 12-15 inches (including a 2-3 inch tail).  
**Weight:** 1-3 lbs.  
**Lifespan:** 3-5 years in the wild; 8 years in captivity.

**Little Dogs on the Prairie**

This weeklong blog series includes several videos showcasing prairie dog behavior, courtesy of the educational TV series, *Expeditions with Patrick McMillan*.

[Get a rare glimpse into the wild lives of prairie dogs >>](http://www.defendersblog.org/tag/little-dogs-on-the-prairie/)

**Diet**

Black-tailed prairie dogs mainly consume grasses, sedges,  
forbs (flowering plants), roots and seeds, though they are also known to eat insects.

**Population**

Black-tailed prairie dogs once numbered in the hundreds of millions – maybe even over 1 billion – and were possibly the most abundant mammal in North America. But due to a variety of reasons, their numbers have decreased by over 95%. Today they may number around 10-20 million.

**Did You Know?**

Unlike the other species of prairie dogs found world-wide, the black tailed prairie dog does not hibernate in the winter and can often be seen above ground level during mid-winter.

**Range**

Black-tailed prairie dog colonies were once found across the Great Plains from southern Canada to northern Mexico. Their colonies once occupied probably 40-80 million acres within this 400 million acre region, and were often tens of miles long. Today their small, scattered colonies occupy 1-2 million acres within this region. They have been eradicated completely from Arizona but survive in small numbers (relative to historic numbers) in the other 10 U.S. states, 2 Mexican states, and 1 Canadian province. [See a black-tailed prairie dog range map >>](http://www.defenders.org/images/factsheets/range/Rangemap_BlkTailedPrairieDog_550x400.jpg)

**Behavior**

Prairie dogs are colonial animals that live in complex networks of tunnels with multiple openings. Colonies are easily identified by the raised-burrow entrances that give the diminutive prairie dogs some extra height when acting as sentries and watching for predators or signs of danger. The tunnels contain separate "rooms" for sleeping, rearing young, storing food, and eliminating waste.

Prairie dogs are very social and live in closely knit family groups called "coteries." Coteries usually contain an adult male, one or more adult females and their young offspring. These coteries are grouped together into wards (or neighborhoods) and several wards make up a colony or town.

Prairie dogs have a complex system of communication that includes a variety of pitched warning barks that signal different types of predators. Prairie dogs earned their name from settlers traveling across the plains who thought that these warning calls sounded similar to dogs barking.

**Defenders at Work**

[Learn more about Defenders' work to save black-tailed prairie dogs >>](http://www.defenders.org/programs_and_policy/wildlife_conservation/imperiled_species/black-tailed_prairie_dog/index.php)

**Reproduction**  
**Mating Season:** March.  
**Gestation:** 33-38 days. Pups are born in April or May.  
**Litter size:** 3-4 pups average, range of 1-8.

**Climate Change and Other Threats**

Prairie dogs are threatened by habitat destruction, poisoning, shooting and exotic disease (sylvatic plague). The remaining prairie dog colonies are small and fragmented, separated by great expanses of cropland and human development. Prairie dog colony losses continue today due to all of these threats.

Climate change could affect prairie dog habitat by increasing the intensity and duration of droughts, which reduce the availability of the grassland plants they need for food, and can increase the frequency of fires and the threat of invasive species.

**Reasons For Hope**

Thanks to the grassroots efforts of tens of thousands of Defenders activists and advocacy from our legal experts, prairie dogs and other wildlife on the Great Plains have scored some key wins.

**Defenders at Work**

Learn about Defenders' legal work to stop the use of Rozol, a cruel chemical being used to eradicate prairie dog populations in United States pasture land. [Read *Progress for Prairie Dogs* >>](http://www.defenders.org/newsroom/defenders_magazine/winter_2010/defenders_in_action_defenders_seeks_to_curb_wildlife_poisoning.php)

In November 2009, federal officials issued a prairie dog management plan for the Thunder Basin National Grassland in Wyoming. It is the first National Grassland prairie dog plan that truly focuses on nonlethal management before considering lethal control. The plan also bans shooting in several areas, promotes prairie dog restoration in core areas and promises reintroduction of the black-footed ferret -- a highly endangered animal that depends on prairie dogs to survive.

In January 2010, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced that the agency would stop funding the use of Rozol -- a poison commonly used to kill prairie dogs. Rozol is highly toxic, causing a prolonged and painful death. The poison kills other animals who prey on the affected prairie dogs, killing golden and bald eagles, swift foxes and other predators -- including the black-footed ferret.

While FWS’s action won’t eliminate the use of Rozol and other toxins, it’s a step in the right direction. Defenders has taken the Environmental Protection Agency to court to stop the use of Rozol and we’re fighting to ensure the agency doesn’t approve another deadly poison, Kaput-D, to wreak havoc on the American plains.

In July 2010, hundreds of prairie dogs in were trapped and relocated them to a protected area within Thunder Basin National Grassland in eastern Wyoming. [Learn more about this ambitious and critical project to protect this keystone species >](http://www.defenders.org/about_us/success_stories/prairie_dogs_moved_to_safer_ground_at_thunder_basin.php)>

**Legal Status/Protection**

No federal or international protections.

**How You Can Help**

* Help prairie dogs and other wildlife by adopting an animal at our [**Wildlife Adoption Center**](http://wildlifeadoption.defenders.org/factsheet).
* Take Action for Wildlife at our [**Wildlife Action Center**](http://www.defenders.org/take_action/index.php).

**For additional information**

* [Prairie Dog Coalition](http://www.prairiedogcoalition.org/)
* [U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service](http://mountain-prairie.fws.gov/species/mammals/btprairiedog/)